LIFE ON THE VERGE
John 5:2-9
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William Muehl, professor at Yale Divinity School, tells about visiting an old colonial house outside New Haven. The house was occupied by the last living survivor of the original owner; a frail, elderly woman. He noticed an antique rifle hanging over the mantel and as he reached to touch it the old woman restrained him and said, "Don't! It's loaded." She explained that her great, great, great grandfather had loaded the gun and placed it there for the day when he might take it down to use in the fight for liberty. Professor Muehl concluded that the old gentleman must have died prior to 1776: thus the still-loaded gun. "No," the old woman said, "he lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817." With a wry smile she added, "He just never seemed able to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington's rebellion." (All the Damned Angels, p.52).

That story is a favorite of mine because it describes something I see in other people and in myself. I have called it "Life on the verge". What I mean by that is life lived waiting, planning, preparing: life which assumes that whatever we are waiting, planning and preparing for is sometime in the future. It is not now.

That's an illusion, of course; a dangerous, tragic illusion, but a strong one, nevertheless. How very many of us live by it, and under its authority! We look to the future for the sense of satisfaction and contentment and wholeness that is eluding us at the moment. Someday we will know that we matter, our work will be significant; someday we'll come home in the evening full of a sense of accomplishment, but for the moment we're a little strung out, the busy details of life don't seem to be related to anything in particular, and we have a knot in our stomach and don't sleep well and push too hard. But someday...

Someday we'll get the promotion, the raise, the new job that will allow us to breathe easier. Someday we'll read more books and see more movies and take leisurely walks with our wives/husbands and next year, for sure, we'll spend more time with our children. In the meantime, it's life on the verge. One of the best sellers several years ago was Gail Sheehy's Passages, which described, documented and celebrated the trauma and often tragic results which occur when middle age people realize that the future is not ever going to happen - that the present, with all its ordinaries will simply continue...

French priest Michel Quoist wrote a devastating prayer once that most of us should read to ourselves at least daily.

> "You understand, Lord, they simply haven't the time.
> The child is playing, he hasn't the time right now...Later on.
> The schoolboy has his homework to do, he hasn't time...Later on.
> The student has his courses, and so much work...Later on...
> The young man is at his sports, he hasn't the time...Later on...
> The young married man has his new house; he has to fix it up. he hasn't time...Later on...
> The grandparents have their grandchildren. They haven't time...Later on...
> They are ill, they have their treatments, they haven't time...Later on...
> They are dying, they have no...
> Too late!...They have no more time!" (Prayers, p.96).

Significance, we believe, will happen to us in the future. But it is not only an illusion of time. It has to do more basically with attitude. Someone has suggested that most of us divide reality into two spheres: on the one hand - the real, exciting

vital; on the other hand - the sphere of our own ordinary affairs. The playing field where battles are fought and victories won, and the bench on the side lines where we are sitting. In religion, for instance, most of us listen with great interest to stories about what God is doing somewhere else;in the Soviet Union, in South Africa, in Taiwan, in the next city, or the church down the street. Religiously, our experience is too ordinary to describe. God is revealing himself clearly, dramatically and compellingly to other people in other situations but not to us. We're still asking the same dreary old questions and fighting off doubt and every time we pray we are distracted by the sound of our own voice. We may be on the verge of a dynamic faith - but we don't have it yet.

At some point in time we have to deal with the gap between our expectations and the reality of life. Part of it, I believe, is undoubtedly that other people's experiences always sound richer, clearer, more dramatic and satisfying than ours actually feel. But part of it, I am convinced, is learning to deal with the present, the here and now as the primary place for excitement, accomplishment, satisfaction to happen. Not the future - but today - in all its ordinariness. If we can't learn that, we are condemned to a lifetime of frustrated waiting.

Like the man in the text this morning. There is no more relevant personality in the Gospel narrative, I conclude, than this one who is approaching the four decade point in his career. Thirty-eight years! That's almost the span of productive years our culture assigns to each of us, and this man had spent his waiting, on the verge.

The archeologists have found the pool, by the way, deep under the ground, near the church of St. Anne's in Jerusalem; a double pool actually, deep with a porch on each side and one on the divider between the two sections; a big pool - half a football field, fed by an underground, intermittent spring. When the spring began to flow, the water on the surface splashed and danced and turned a reddish color, a phenomenon the ancients attributed to a local spirit. The Jews concluded that an angel did the disturbing but they retained the essence of the tradition; namely, that the first person into the water after the disturbance would be healed.

So, around the perimeters of the pool were the crippled and the sick and the very old, watching, waiting, some of them with a relative nearby to help them through the frantic scrambling whenever the water stirred. And some of them alone, having given up long ago any hope of ever making it to the pool, going through the motions to be sure, but resigned to living life on the verge.

Thirty-eight years is a long time to wait. Don't you imagine that the man, somewhere in that period, simply gave up, and began to make a kind of peace with his position? Don't you suppose he took stock and concluded that there was something to be said for life on the porch? He had his friends there. Passersby often left alms. He had his bed to lie on - not a bad life really.

That, I think, is the significance of the question Jesus asked. "Do you want to be healed?" Jesus caught him playing a game - life on the verge. He had made a ritual out of it. He really had no intention of altering his situation. One commentator paraphrases: "While you are waiting and watching and ruing the distance between yourself and immersion into the creative and healing forces, while you may feel on the verge, you are already fully in the midst of these forces...Rise, take up your pallet and walk." (Op, cit., p.2).

The man did just that. He never did make it into the pool. He simply gathered his resources and somehow did what he had spent thrity-eight years trying to accomplish. Our faith is that something like that: that command, "Rise, take up your pallet and walk" - and that response, that obedient, risky, faithful, getting up and walking, is what happens always between Jesus Christ and ourselves.

Faith, we conclude, is not believing things about God; it is following. It is an activity best described as a pilgrimage, a journey. It began that way, we believe, back on the edges of recorded history when God called Abraham to move and Abraham, not knowing where he was going, obeyed. It continued across the centuries of time, we believe, as God called and pushed and scolded and prodded and led the descendants of that same Abraham up through a wilderness and into nationhood.

Faith, throughout is following. It involves risk always, and will, and strength and trust. The man by the pool, after all, took real chances by getting up and walking away. He could fall. He could find that he had nowhere else to go. He could discover that he had no way to provide for himself. The risks in walking - in assuming responsibility for one's own present and future are high indeed. The church has to learn that lesson in every generation. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ is risky business. Sometimes it seems like we're being asked to fall flat on our faces. Sometimes prudent people conclude that the best interests of the church are to play it safe, take no chances, stay on the porch. The church must learn and relearn that Jesus Christ calls it to be a pilgrim people, willing to walk into the future without any guarantees of success or even safety.

And people who wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ must learn it too: would be ministers, of course, but all of us - attorneys, doctors, students, homemakers, laborers. To be a Christian means to give up the illusion of life on the verge and embrace this life, this today as the time and place God wants us to live and move and have being. It means hearing the voice of Jesus Christ commanding you, me, to rise and become now what we want to become.

And it means trust, finally. The man discovered that he had been given the strength and resources he needed whenever he tried to walk. Our faith is that just as Jesus empowered and enabled that man to walk - so, mysteriously, He gives resources and strength to any person who trusts Him enough to follow.

Does it mean that we have it in ourselves to grow and become and experience full Christian faith, if we simply try harder? Arthur J. Gossip wrote, "Looking at Christ, somehow we find that we can do what we have always failed to do, can be what we could never be..." (IB, vol. 8, p.540).

Jesus took this initiative. He opened the conversation, as we have come to expect Him, asking the blunt, jolting question and He issued the saving command. The crippled man, to his everlasting credit, had the courage to respond, to risk everything by standing up, unassisted. That's faith. And in that act, that momentary, courageous act of affirmation - he was given power, healing and life.

"Do you want to be healed?" It is the Christian experience that in Jesus Christ God keeps asking that question. Everything, it seems; life on the verge perpetually waiting, watching; or life, full, rich, open, beautiful, a little risky, exciting, life saved by God's love - depends on the answer.

Amen.

Eternal God, we are not always open to adventure. We thank You for nagging impatience that makes us uncomfortable with the status quo. Give us courage and strength and faith to trust our lives to You. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.